

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 173 801

CS 204 945

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 TITLE The Effect of Expressive Writing upon College Freshmen's Cognitive and Affective Development.
 PUB DATE [78]
 NOTE 31p.; Research prepared at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
 EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS *Academic Achievement; *Composition (Literary); Higher Education; Low Achievers; *Reading Comprehension; *Reading Instruction; Reading Skills; *Self Esteem; *Self Expression; Student Attitudes; Writing Exercises; Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

A total of 69 college freshmen, all on academic probation, were involved in an examination of the effects of expressive writing practice upon students' reading, self-esteem, attitudes toward instruction, and academic achievement. An experimental group consisting of 35 students followed a writing/reading curriculum, while a control group of 34 students followed the reading curriculum only. Both groups used the same three textbooks, each of which stressed reading techniques such as exploring, vocabulary development, analyzing, and synthesizing for comprehension. Students in both groups were administered standardized reading tests. Six instruments were used to assess self-esteem and three to assess attitudes toward instruction. Grade point averages were used to measure academic achievement. The results suggested that expressive writing practice may have a positive effect upon reading comprehension. An examination of the data assessing self-esteem and attitudes suggests that expressive writing practice may have a greater effect upon attitudes than upon self-esteem. There were no significant differences in grade point averages between the groups, suggesting that reading instruction on the college level has no short term effects upon academic achievement. (FL)

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The Effect of Expressive Writing Upon College

Freshmen's Cognitive and Affective

Development

Carmen Collins

Recent concern in higher education has centered upon the inability of many entering students to contend with the complexities of reading and writing on the college level. As a result, developmental reading and remedial writing courses have begun to proliferate in college curriculums across the country. However, despite a growing body of research into the relationship between reading and writing, more often than not, the two disciplines continue to be taught separately.

More important, the expressive mode of writing in particular has been variously described as a "mode of learning" (Emig, 1977), as "psychologically prior" to all other uses of language (Kinneavy, 1971), and as the mode in which "we frame the tentative first drafts of new ideas" and which can easily serve "as a means of exploration and discovery" (Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod, Rosen, 1975), yet little empirical evidence is available regarding its effect upon students' cognitive and affective development.

The present study combined an expressive writing component with college reading instruction in order to examine the effect of expressive writing practice upon students' reading, self-esteem, attitudes, and academic achievement. The Investigation attempted to answer four fundamental questions:

Question One: Do poor readers who practice expressive writing as an integral and related component of a college reading course demonstrate greater gains in reading than students who receive reading instruction without a writing component?

Question Two: Do students who practice expressive writing concurrently with reading instruction exhibit more positive self-esteem and attitudes at the completion of the course than students who receive only reading instruction?

Question Three: Is there a relationship between a student's level of self-esteem and his/her amount of gain in reading comprehension?

Question Four: Does a writing-reading curriculum increase college freshmen's academic achievement more than the traditional reading curriculum without a writing component?

Theories and Implications

The assumption that there are interrelationships among the uses of language is not a new one, and empirical evidence from studies of elementary school children has supported the thesis for many decades (Buckingham, 1940; Hildreth, 1948; Huey, 1908; Loban, 1963). Concern, however, about the relationship between reading and writing in higher education is a more recent phenomenon and may have accelerated when lowered SAT scores in reading were accompanied by students' decreased abilities in writing.

In a recent study of 186 college freshmen, investigators concluded that reading and writing skills are systematically related -- that is, that knowledge of one is a valid predictor of the other (Grobe & Grobe, 1977). Students enrolled in either a freshman composition course or a freshman remedial writing course were tested in both reading and writing. A correlation of .50, statistically significant beyond the .01 level, was found between the reading and writing scores. Implicit in the assumption that knowledge of one is a valid predictor of the other is the theory of transfer of learning.

Thorndike's premise (1963) that training in one mental function can affect or improve other mental functions

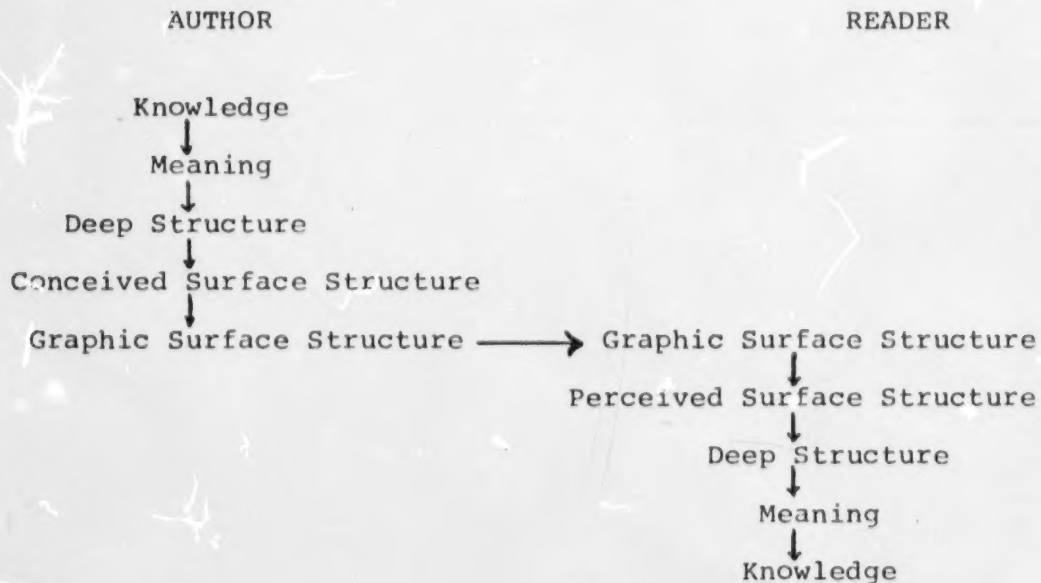
"... in so far as the two functions have as factors identical elements. . ." was augmented by Judd's theory of generalization of experience in which he explicitly held that language is the medium by which knowledge is transferred, and that instructors can teach for transfer by encouraging students to think about features which might be generalized to new situations (Ellis, 1965; Sandiford, 1963).

If indeed, learning theory supports the possibility of transfer of similar elements and depicts language as the medium of transfer, can we not assume that the transfer of language skills which contain both the similar elements required and which in essence are the media of transfer, can themselves be transferred one among the other?

Page (1974) attempted to explain the relationship between reading and writing and to show that the two processes contain the same elements although author and reader proceed through the dynamic process of communication in opposite directions. His chart entitled, A General Concept of Writing and Reading, does not intend to depict the processes as linear, for there are many recursive and overlapping segments and directional changes in both the reader's and writer's

behaviors. Page is the first to admit that there may be difficulties with his theoretical framework because the communication process is difficult to study empirically, nevertheless, he offers the model as a challenge for further research.

A General Concept of Writing and Reading



In order to fully comprehend the processes of reading and writing it is essential to understand the process of mind. Although the science of the mind is still in its infancy, reading and writing considered as information-

processing activities is not a new concept (Holland, 1975; Huey, 1908; Iser, 1969; Rosenblatt, 1938).

The reading process had long seemed to me to mirror the process of thinking, and thus came to seem an appropriate subject for psychological analysis. (Huey)

Although the complexities of the unobservable phenomenon of comprehension continue to elude, most researchers concur that the process involves thought and cognition. Smith (1975) says comprehension is ". . . an essential precondition and logically prior to learning" and defines comprehension as "relating new experiences to the already known" while distinguishing it from learning which he describes as ". . . changing or elaborating on what is already known".

The already known appears to be a prime factor in both comprehension and learning for in his/her own mind, each reader "re-creates" the work of the author (Holland, 1975), and "The convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence. . ." (Iser, 1969). In other words, readers project their worlds into what they read, and each reader tends to gain different insights from the same

reading (Purves, 1976; Rosenblatt, 1938). Marcel Proust (1927), as quoted by Holland (1975), said it best:

In reality, each reader reads only what is already within himself. The book is only a sort of optical instrument which the writer offers to the reader to enable the latter to discover in himself what he would not have found but for the aid of the book.

It appears that all of the theories about comprehension also apply to writing. Clearly, writing involves relating new experiences to the already known. The writer, too, re-creates experiences as well as imaginative occurrences, and the pen, as well as the book, is an instrument to enable the writer to discover in himself what he would not have noticed but for the aid of the pen. Shaughnessy suggests that free forms of writing (e.g. journals, notations) be practiced "until the pen seems a natural extension of the hand, and the hand of the mind itself" (1977).

Because of the nature of reading and writing, as processes of thought and cognition, it can further be implied that both activities are creative acts. Therefore, it may be assumed

that both reader and writer experience all four stages of creative thought: Preparation, Incubation, Illumination, and Verification (as named by Wallas, 1926).

The preparation stage could be likened to the reader's experiencing (Gardner, 1973) the material, while incubation can be compared to a thinking phase, a symbolic transformation (Langer, 1942) of sorts, wherein the reader relates the material to the already known. Illumination might be compared to the internal synthesis of thought and cognition, or movements through successive approximations of meaning (Witkin, 1974), all of which lead to understanding, comprehension, or verification, the last stage of creativity where solutions are chosen (Williams, 1952).

When reading is looked upon as a creative process, it, too, like writing, becomes a mode of drafting and synthesizing new ideas, and a means of exploring and discovering new meanings -- ways of making sense out of the inner and outer worlds of experience, feelings, and thoughts. It is this development of self-understanding which leads to growth in the affective domain.

In the classroom, through expressive writing, students find someone who is interested in them, their writing, and

their ideas (Britton, 1978; Graves, 1978). Even the poorest writers grow enthusiastic when participating in expressive writing tasks (Forbes, 1976; Macrorie, 1970).

In addition, expressive writing practice is an aid to writing fluency and a help in preventing writer's block (Elbow, 1973), and its use in the classroom, without grading or evaluation, can prevent the harm which may come from paralyzing students' personal expression with a red pencil (Graves, 1978). Furthermore, expressive writing combined with reading instruction enhances cognitive and affective development by synthesizing thought and growth for authentic learning.

Rogers (1969) contended that there are two kinds of learning. The first kind, and this includes much of the material taught in school, has "the same perplexing, meaningless quality that the list of nonsense syllables has for us. . . . In contrast, there is such a thing as significant, meaningful, experiential learning". He defines the elements in significant, or experiential learning as having the qualities of personal involvement even when stimulation is extrinsic, and as being pervasive, that is, making "a difference in the behavior, the attitudes, perhaps even the personality of

the learner". In significant learning, the student evaluates his own work rather than relying upon grades or red-pencilling from the teacher. Rogers concluded that there is no other possible definition of education except that which includes the elements of significant or experiential learning.

Procedures

The sample consisted of 69 [REDACTED] College Freshmen whose scores fell into the lowest thirtieth percentile on the Nelson-Denny Reading Test and whose grade-point averages for the first freshmen semester were lower than the college standard for continued matriculation. In other words, all second semester freshmen in this study were on probation and were admonished to raise their grade-point averages to 3.6 by the end of freshman year. ([REDACTED] calculates grade-point averages on a descending scale from 1 to 5: 1=A, 5=F).

The design of this inquiry can be described as a modified Solomon Four-Group Design (Campbell and Stanley, 1963) because it used both the Pretest-Posttest Control Group Design and the Posttest-Only Control Group Design. The term Four-Group, in this case, means that two groups were tested in two different ways.

The Pretest-Posttest Control Group Design was used to measure changes in reading ability and academic achievement through the Nelson-Denny Reading Test and Grade-Point Averages. The Posttest-Only Control Group Design was used to examine levels of Self-Esteem and Attitudes at the conclusion of the reading course through the Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale and the Whiteley Thoughts About Myself and School questionnaire.

The use of intact classes rather than randomly selected groups of subjects created a control problem which mandated pretest comparisons of the experimental and control groups on the dependent variable and on appropriate control variables to demonstrate equivalence of the groups (Tuckman, 1978). "The more similar the experimental and the control groups are in their recruitment, and the more this similarity is confirmed by the scores on the pretest, the more effective this control becomes" (Campbell, Stanley, 1963).

The two groups were found to be equal when the following variables were compared: Probationary status, Class standing, Reading course requirement, and Combination of low grade-point averages and reading scores in lowest thirtieth percentile.

The analyses of the groups with regard to the reading

pretest, grade-point averages, age, and sex distribution indicated that statistically non-significant differences existed between the experimental and control groups. The matching procedure, therefore, eliminated the control problem in terms of selection and provided the rationale for the use of gain score comparisons. Since the comparisons indicated that the groups were sufficiently equivalent, the Nelson-Denny Reading Test D-scores (difference between pre and posttest scores) were compared for the two groups to ascertain the effect of the treatment (Ary, Jacobs & Razavieh, 1972; Tuckman, 1978).

Instructional Procedures

and Treatment

Of the 69 ~~freshmen~~ freshmen who participated in the investigation, 35 constituted the treatment or experimental group and followed a writing-reading curriculum, while 34 constituted the control group and followed a reading curriculum. The reading portion of the curriculum was the same for both groups. All students used three textbooks: How To Read the Humanities, How To Read the Sciences, and How To Read the Social Sciences. The formats of each book stressed reading techniques such as exploring, vocabulary development, analyzing, and synthesizing for comprehension (Adams, 1969,

1970; Brown and Adams, 1968).

In addition to the reading curriculum, the experimental group engaged in some form of writing every class period. Each session began with a ten-minute writing exercise in the expressive mode with no restrictions on or directions about content. Occasionally, the students were invited to write on a specific topic, if they chose to do so. Topics included: Feelings About Writing (before and after the course), Addressing Another Person (dead or alive), Addressing an Inanimate Object, Writing From an Emotion Strongly Felt.

In the transactional mode, students wrote one model paragraph for each of seven specific patterns described in their textbooks: Illustrations and Examples, Definition, Cause and Effect, Comparison and Contrast, Argument and Opinion (Adams, 1969; Adams, 1970), Classification Pattern, Process-Description Pattern (Brown, Adams, 1968).

In one session, the poetic mode was discussed and students were asked to write in a poetic mode of their choice. A number of students, because they were lacking experience in poetic writing, had difficulty with the form. It was then that the structured pattern of diamante was used as a stimulus. The class as a group wrote a simple diamante poem,

then each student wrote his/her own poem in the same structured pattern.

Throughout the study, none of the students' writings were graded or corrected, however, comments were made by the instructor in response to content, and papers were returned promptly at the class meeting immediately following their submission.

Since investigator and instructor were one in this study, efforts were made to control for experimenter bias by limiting the amount of discussion of the treatment variable (expressive writing) to the first introductory session, and by proceeding without further discussion of expressive writing during subsequent sessions.

At the introductory session, students were informed that they would be writing every day for the following reasons:

- (1) To develop fluency in writing
- (2) To overcome fear of writing and writer's block
- (3) To practice skills being learned
- (4) To clarify personal ideas and values.

It is important to mention here that the ten-minute, twice-weekly, writing session was part of the eighty-minute class period and was not extra task time for the experimental group. In essence, the time allotted for reading instruction was diminished by the time expended in expressive writing.

Findings

To answer the question Do poor readers who practice expressive writing as an integral and related component of a college reading course demonstrate greater gains in reading comprehension than students who receive reading instruction without a writing component?, the experimental and control groups' pretest and posttest results in Vocabulary, Comprehension, and Total Scores on the Nelson-Denny Reading Test were compared and t-tests for paired data were used to examine each group's gains. The results revealed that both groups achieved statistically significant gains in all areas of the reading test.

To determine if there were significant differences between group gains, gain scores were compared for each subtest and for total scores. T-tests between independent samples showed non-significance in the 2.49 point mean gain difference in Vocabulary. The higher mean gain of 4.04 points achieved by the experimental group on the Comprehension subtest was found to be significant at the .05 level, and the same group's 6.53 point gain over the control group's Total Score was also significant at the .05 level. (In all instances raw scores were used).

To answer the question Do students who practice expressive writing concurrently with reading instruction exhibit more positive self-esteem and attitudes than students who receive only reading instruction?, six instruments were used, three to assess levels of self-esteem and three to assess attitudes toward instruction.

Assessment of Self-Esteem: The primary instrument used to assess self-esteem was the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, a ten-item scale which was designed to measure global attitudes toward the self and was chosen for its brevity, ease of administration, and face validity. It has a reliability coefficient of .92 (Rosenberg, 1965). Two other clusters of questions were abstracted from the Whiteley Thoughts About Myself and School questionnaire. The questionnaire was chosen as a supplementary instrument for this study because of its versatility and appropriateness: the items were varied and numerous enough for re-grouping according to face validity, the format was flexible enough for the addition of other pertinent items, and the item content clearly matched the basic questions posed by the study.

Six items, grouped and entitled, Primary Self-Esteem (PSE), were used to tap what a person says to himself about himself with

regard to important dimensions of self-regard (Whiteley, 1976). Eight items, grouped and entitled Self-Esteem Related to School, were used to assess the way in which the student sees himself with regard to important academic referents.

Analyses of the three measures, RSES, PSE, and SERS revealed that there were non-significant differences in the mean scores of the experimental and control groups. In other words, at the end of the semester, there were no differences in self-esteem between the two groups.

Assessment of Attitudes: The two clusters of questions used to assess attitudes were developed by the investigator and added to the Whiteley questionnaire. Five items, grouped and entitled, Attitudes Toward Instruction (ATI), were used to assess attitudes toward the reading course attended by the students in the study. Two items, grouped and entitled, Attitudes Toward Reading and Writing (ATRW), were used to assess students' global feelings toward reading and writing.

Each of the ATI and ATRW items was treated as a separate variable, examined by means of Chi Square analyses, and group comparisons were examined through contingency tables. A comparison of responses by the experimental and control groups

to items on the ATI instrument revealed significant differences in four out of five cases with the experimental group responding more positively in all four instances. A comparison of responses by the experimental and control groups to items on the ATRW instrument revealed non-significant differences in attitudes toward reading and writing.

Additional data on attitudes was obtained through the ~~College~~ College Study Improvement Program Course and Instructor Evaluation Form. A comparison of the anonymous responses by the two groups to items on the ATCI instrument revealed that the experimental group responded more positively to three out of the five items, while the remaining two items showed non-significant differences in responses.

To answer the question Is there a relationship between a student's level of self-esteem and his amount of gain in reading comprehension?, Pearson's Correlation Coefficients were computed to compare RSES, PSE, and SERS scores with Nelson-Denny reading gain scores. Out of a total of eighteen correlations only three were significantly positive. The highest correlation coefficient (.4876) was obtained between the Nelson-Denny Comprehension gain score and RSES for the experimental group. Equally significant, beyond the .01 level,

was the coefficient (.4234) for the experimental group's total reading gain score and RSES. The third significant positive correlation coefficient (.3106) was obtained between the experimental group's comprehension gains on the Nelson-Denny Reading Test and PSE.

To answer the question Does a writing-reading curriculum increase college freshmen's academic achievement more than the traditional reading curriculum without a writing component?, mean grade-point difference scores were computed for the experimental and control groups. The difference of .041 between the two groups' mean gains was non-significant.

Conclusions

The finding of statistically significant differences in reading comprehension and in total gain scores for the experimental group suggests that expressive writing practice may have a positive effect upon reading comprehension. These findings would support the theory of interrelationship among the uses of language. Lundsford (1978) had found that students of remedial English were both poor writers and poor readers, and "... their gains in these two areas clearly paralleled each other". It would appear then, that the practice of expressive writing in itself has some effect upon reading comprehension.

On the other hand, Heys found the opposite to be true. His students who were given additional reading assignments tended to write better and their writing gains superseded those of students who wrote more but read less. Therefore, Heys concluded that the combination of reading and writing instruction may be more effective than the practice of one or the other in isolation (Haynes, 1978).

It is quite possible that the combination of reading and writing practice works best with older students as Lowey (1964) suggested when he found increasingly significant correlations between reading and writing as students' grade levels rose. This assumption was borne out by Grobe and Grobe (1977) who found high correlations between reading and writing abilities in college freshmen.

The theory of the relationship between reading and writing as expressed by Page (1974) is based upon the premise that both reading and writing are forms of communication as well as language processing modes and therefore one may require some of the same techniques or skills as the other. If this is true, then transfer of learning would be another way of explaining how practice in one can increase ability in the other (Ellis, 1965; Thorndike, 1963).

Since Judd held that language is the medium by which knowledge is transferred (Sandiford, 1963), it would seem reasonable to assume that language and its uses could themselves become elements of transfer. Campbell (1976) suggested that reading and writing be taught together in college for maximum transfer of learning. This theory has been validated by Stephens (1963) and LeFevre (1964) in their agreement that transfer takes place best if the similar elements of possible transfer are pointed out to the students beforehand.

Although researchers have been unable to define the basic elements of possible transfer between the uses of language, studies have shown that the abilities to conceptualize and to draw inferences are needed for comprehension as well as for writing ability. (Artley, 1950; Haynes, 1978; Lundsford, 1978). Furthermore, it has been suggested that students' reading levels can actually be predicted from analyses of samples of their writing (Lazdowski, 1976).

Huey, as far back as 1908, regarded reading as an information-processing skill and has been supported in this belief by Rosenblatt (1938, 1968, 1976) and her followers. That writing is another form of information-processing is

implicit in the more recent literature (Britton, et al, 1975; Elbow, 1973; Emig, 1977; Parker, 1978). The idea that writing brings order and understanding and meaning to one's thoughts and experiences is another way of saying that writing processes internal information, makes it external, and holds it in graphic relief for further reflection and learning.

Expressive writing then, would seem to be psychologically prior to other modes of writing (Kinneavy, 1971) because it is a way of processing one's personal thoughts, beliefs, and conjectures. It may, in fact, be a 'graphic' way of thinking.

An examination of the data assessing self-esteem and attitudes suggests that the practice of expressive writing in a college reading course may have a greater effect upon attitudes than on self-esteem. The chi square analyses of the twelve items which comprised ATI, ATRW, and ATCI showed the experimental group's attitudes to be significantly more positive in seven of the twelve cases. On the other hand, at the conclusion of the reading course, there were non-significant differences in the two groups' global self-esteem, primary self-esteem, and self-esteem related to school as measured by RSES, PSE, and SERS, respectively.

One explanation for the more positive attitudes of the treatment group may be attributed to the nature of expressive writing. As a mode prior to other uses of language, it gives

personal significance to the writer for purposes of reflection and understanding (Macrorie, 1970; Kinneavy, 1971; Maslow, 1971). To put it another way, when students are permitted to write expressively in the classroom, the teacher in effect is implying that they have something worthwhile to say (Graves, 1978).

The proponents of free or expressive writing agree that the experience is a freeing one for most students. They become free from the fear of writing itself, and free from the lack of confidence in their writing which most students feel at one time or another (Southwell, 1977). Perhaps it is this experience of freedom in writing which tends to encourage more positive attitudes.

The finding of a significant positive correlation between the Nelson-Denny comprehension subtest scores and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale scores as well as between Nelson-Denny total scores and Rosenberg scores for the experimental group validates an assumption largely held in the literature that self-concept or self-esteem "has been found to be consistently related to reading achievement, in spite of the variety of measures used to assess both factors" (Athey, 1976) and that self-concept is positively related toward learning to read as well as toward reading achievement (Estill, Filler, 1976; Mathewson, 1976; Quandt, 1972).

The finding of non-significant differences in grade-point averages between the experimental and control groups bears out a number of studies which suggest that reading instruction on the college level has no short term effects upon academic achievement (DePierro, 1973; Fairbanks, 1974; Wright, 1962) and which substantiate the conclusion that academic achievement is affected by a large number of uncontrollable variables. As for the non-significance in grade-point difference between the expressive writing group and the non-writing group, it can only be suggested that expressive writing has no short-term effect upon academic achievement.

It seems, from the review of the literature, the findings, and conclusions of this study, that both reading and writing are highly complex skills, the learning of which may be life-long processes. Reading instruction must be pursued long after decoding skills are learned, and writing must continue to be practiced beyond the stage of handwriting legibility. That reading and writing may share common skills and techniques is important enough to pursue further, particularly since the separation of the two processes in the classroom appears not to be working.

Questions for Further Study

What are the cognitive learning factors common to both reading and writing?

Can students be taught to learn what processes are shared between reading and writing?

Can classroom activities be developed to enable students to shift freely from role of reader to role of writer and vice versa?

Should reading and writing instruction continue to be separate subjects in the classroom?

How can the reading teacher and the English teacher help one another?

How can a reading-writing curriculum be developed in order to teach for transfer of learning between the two skills?

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